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Homily of the Superior General for Open Meeting of the Visitors

Readings: Tobit 1:1-2; 2:1-9; Matthew 12:1-12

Today's first reading ends like a chapter in a Dickens' novel. It leaves us hanging in suspense, awaiting the next installment: "I went to sleep," Tobit says, "and because of the heat I left my face uncovered."

Of course, having read the book, we all know what happens next. A bird, responding to the call of nature, lets his droppings fall right in Tobit's eyes and he is blinded.

But in introducing this rather jarring story, the author has already made the theme of the Book of Tobit very clear: the just man loves the law of the Lord and he loves the poor. The Book of Tobit is filled with many other interesting themes. In fact, it has a little bit of something for everyone. It theologizes about civil disobedience to unjust laws. It talks about the sufferings of the just. It offers wonderful instructions to married couples like Tobiah and Sarah, and it speaks continually about providence, symbolized by the presence of Raphael all during the journey of the young Tobiah. But the principal themes are love of the law of the Lord and love of the poor. As we begin this Visitors' Meeting, let me say a word about these two themes as they refer to the life of a Visitor.

Love of the law of the Lord. The new law of the Lord for us is the good news of Jesus, though St. Paul tells us it is not an external law binding us in, but an internal law, the power of God liberating us to go out of ourselves. Perhaps too we could say — though it is by no means on the same level — that our Constitutions and Statutes are the law of the Lord for us. I encourage you as Visitors to make both these sources — the good news of God's presence in Jesus and our own Constitutions and Statutes — the substantial food that you share with the confreres. St. Vincent says that the word of Jesus never fails. If the houses of the Congregation are built upon it, they can sustain any tempest. The winds may blow, the rains may fall, the floods may rise but the house stands because it is built upon rock. And our Constitutions and Statutes are in a sense a modern-day concretization of what the Lord is asking of us as members of the Congregation: they describe what works we should pursue, what our life together should be like, what our spirituality is, what our vows commit us to, and, in juridical matters, how the Congregation works, what the processes are by which decisions for the present and the future are made. I encourage you as Visitors to make these two founts the source of your own spirituality. The Lord calls you and me to be animators in the Congregation of the Mission. And in order to animate well, we ourselves must be filled with the Spirit of the Lord like Tobit. We must love the Lord's law, which for us surely is the scriptures and, I suggest too, we must absorb the spirit of our Constitutions and Statutes.

Secondly, the Book of Tobit teaches that the just man loves the poor. “My son,” Tobit says in this first chapter, “go out and try to find a poor man. Bring him back with you so that he can share this meal with me.” Of course, on the deepest level, that is what the vocation of a Visitor and a Superior General is all about. In a way, we are always saying to the confreres: “My brother, go out and find a poor person. Find the poorest of the poor. Bring them to the human table so that they might find food to nourish their bodies, and bring them to the table of the Lord’s word and of the Eucharist so that they might find nourishment too for their spirit.” It is essential, in the midst of all of our other activities and concerns — supporting and running the houses of formation, examining budgets, caring for the aged confreres, intervening in emergencies — it is essential in the midst of all of these concerns, that these words of Tobit direct everything we say or do. “My brother, go out and find a poor person.” This is the purpose of our formation. It is the purpose of the buildings we build. It is, as our Constitutions tell us, the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission. The Lord calls us to find the poor and proclaim the good news of God’s presence and love to them.

So, my brothers, I encourage you as we begin these two weeks together, let the word of God nourish you. Let our Constitutions nourish you. Let the poor nourish you. The Visitor needs this nourishment just as much, perhaps even more, than the confreres he serves. So, use this time to be nourished. Pray with one another. Share the scriptures and the Eucharist with each other each day with peace and joy. Listen to one another well. Relax too and enjoy each other’s company. Let the Lord speak to you. He says today: Love my word. Love your own Constitutions and Statutes. And he encourages you to say to every confrere again and again: “Go find a poor person.” In fact, let that be the underlying theme that motivates everything that you do as Visitor.

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